A New Islander Profile

by George E. Mortimore

MARKET'S CHAMPION

A SQUARE-CUT, voluble Italian called Attilio Randy is leading a fight to save Victoria's public market from destruction.

Every week the 72-year-old master gardener gathers the choicest potted cyclamens, azaleas, cineraria and ferns from the higgedly-piggedly assortment in his weatherbeaten greenhouses on Maple Street, and trundles them down to a stall in the market building, where he has done business for 45 years.

He has been part of the market ever since it began on a vacant lot behind the city hall in August, 1914.

At the end of October of that same year the market moved indoors to its present quarters, the chill, lofty building with the glass roof which at one time was the terminus of the Victoria and Sidney Railway.

Now the city fathers are threatening to tear down the old market building to make a parking lot. The future of the market is cloudy.

As the only one of the original stallholders who is still doing business at the old stand (the same market, not precisely the same stall) Mr. Randy was predestined to be the leader of the "Save the Market" movement.

Some of his customers have been coming to him since the market began. In the intervals between selling potted plants and advising people on their care, Mr. Randy puts the case for the public market in a high, intense voice that is heavily weighted with the accent of his native Padua.

His main points are these: 1. The market building itself is structurally solid, good for a century. To build a like structure today would cost an enormous sum. The building should be used, not torn down.

2. A public market is an important outlet for the small grower, the part-time gardener and the semi-retired man who wants to live on the land and make a modest income. Such men often can not dispose of their produce through other outlets, which are geared to mass production.

3. Canada can be and should be self-supporting in agricultural products. Too high a proportion of vegetables and fruit consumed in Canada is imported, while Canadian produce goes to waste. A public market can be part of the machinery for bringing Canadian produce to consumers, and giving employment to Canadians.

4. The farmer, gardener and small-holder should be encouraged, because he provides a buffer, or third force between the great masses of labor and management which are threatening to dominate the country.

5. Because the small grower has time and patience (as the big market gardener has not) to concentrate on quality, and flavor, rather than on quantity and looks, the public market can be a place where fastidious people can find the best and most nourishing produce. Vegetables and fruit can often take several days in transit from the soil by way of the wholesaler and retailer to the customer. But produce can go from garden to public market and into the cooking pot the same morning.

OLDEST GARDENS

Mr. Randy illustrates these points with many a lively anecdote from his boyhood in Padua or the two years he spent in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

He came of a long-established family of nurserymen; and grew up among plants, so that "when I was 16 or 17 I knew as much about horticulture as a man of 35 or 40."

"But don't put all this in the paper," he said. "If you're going to write anything, keep it as humble as possible. Don't write as if I'm trying to say I'm a giant, so people will think I'm story-teller, big bluffer."

Padua was the site of the world's oldest botanical garden, because Europe's first collection of exotic plants was assembled on the Venetian plains. Venetian explorers and traders, ranging far afield, brought back plants.

Many of the old villas had long-established gardens of exotic plants, and there were many

ATTILIO RANDY

experts. The curator of the public botanical gardens was a friend of Attilio Randy's father.

Despite his family's gardening tradition, Attilio found himself steered into a military career. He attended a military school, entered the army. But a severe sunstroke put Attilio in hospital and ended his army service.

It was then that he spent his two years in Paris, convalescing and getting his bearings.

He came to Canada in 1911, and after a brief interlude on the prairie, settled in Victoria, where he has been ever since.

SUCCESSFUL VENTURE

He started in as a free-lance landscape gardener. But in the gardening business, there is usually a lull in summer. Attilio filled in that gap by growing vegetables. He supplied vegetables to the Empress Hotel for years.

Then the public market began. It was 1914. The war was on. Many young people had left the land. A group of citizens sought means to put the produce of small growers into the hands of the consumers.

As an experiment, the city put a vacant lot to use as a market. The market was an instant success. More would-be stallholders sought space. The market moved into its present building.

People flocked in to buy flowers, fruit, vegetables, poultry, eggs, meat, fish, home made candy, hand-made furniture and ceramics.

Among the customers were governors-general and lieutenant-governors and their ladies, and numerous American visitors.

The market carried on through the depression, and through the 1939-45 war, when it supplied much-needed food in time of scarcity.

"The public market is not a place for making money fast," Mr. Randy says. "But if you are on a piece of land, you have the satisfaction to see that what you produce is not wasted. You simply make a living.

"Since this last war our good services have been forgotten. The city has been only mildly interested in the market to say the least. Raising of rental fees has been beyond what humble people can afford.

"The city never advertises that stalls are available to intending newcomers. Not a coat of paint in several years . . . Does this make sense?

"If war comes, Vancouver Island will be separate from the mainland. We haven't been told, but small farmers are part of the civil defence. This is not the time to eliminate the small farmer . . .

"The market building is a building of massive construction, covering more than half an acre, built to last.

"In London, Paris and Rome, do they demolish old structures? No, they make them part of their history and they preserve them. Why not here?

"Has any person thought what it will cost to replace such a structure as the market building? Can it not be remodelled to make it a two-story edifice—market place on the ground floor, remove all wooden partitions and you will have a fire-proof building, 180 by 120 feet, suitable for an exhibition, festival, and so on; and it will be available for emergency shelter, if there is a tidal wave or a big fire . . .

"I am a horticulturist and I know plants, but the magic surrounding this wonderful profession is diminishing," Mr. Randy wrote in a letter to Defence Minister G. R. Pearkes, VC.

"For nearly 45 years I have devoted my knowledge to the land and plants and yesterday I was able to live; today I can barely exist. Why? This . . . is true of all the small growers.

ECONOMIC ARGUMENT

"Big growers are able to manage because they can afford to specialize, and because wholesale houses are primarily interested in quantity. We cannot all be big . . . One problem we all have is marketing, and the indifference of city business houses who do not appear to realize that it takes a prosperous farming community to make a prosperous town.

"Today, many small people have deserted their land because of inability to dispose of their produce, yet millions of dollars in vegetables and fruit are imported every year . . . Because of the situation of Canada we have a shorter growing season, but wherever there is a chance we should plan the growth of produce so . . . that . . . imports could be drastically curtailed.

"For most of us, it is easier to work for wages —bigger money and shorter hours . . . When the public go to the big stores for their food, do they think how the lavishly displayed fruit and vegetables got there? Do they think of the struggling Canadian farmer?

". . . it seems that very soon there will be only two classes, employer and employee . . . For the sake of our democratic way of life, do not let the small man disappear. Over and over again the small man has been the salvation of France in critical times, and he can be a big factor in our Canadian way of life.

"There is a way in which your government can help . . . the small man to remain solid in the conservative traditions of this land: Appoint a marketing commission for the whole of Canada . . . Help Canadian consumers to realize the importance of demanding the Canadian product . . .

"Establish a public market in every city, town and village throughout the country, and make regular market days a local event. Equip the markets with modern facilities at minimum cost . . . Provide facilities so that surplus produce of one province may be transferred elsewhere where there is a demand . . .

"A public market does not have to be for the farmer and gardener only, but may permit the marketing of any product . . ."

"Whereas the big grower confines himself to a standard product, the small grower has a much larger variety to offer, including his own specialities . . . His produce will offer a welcome change in the daily diet."

That's the creed of Attilio Randy, professional flower and vegetable grower, amateur philosopher, and defender of the market.